

Aborigines writing the rules and winning the game.

The local Aboriginal community controls an organisation called the Victorian Aboriginal Employment Development Association Incorporated (VAEDAI).

VAEDAI states that it "seeks to develop, plan, co-ordinate, implement and evaluate employment and training programs in Aboriginal communities and organisations. It has a major function in advising the relevant minister on matters relating to policy."

The Department of Employment and Industrial Affairs (DEIA) presently funds the VAEDAI secretariate and employs Lyndon Shea to liaise between that organisation and the department.

Lyndon recently visited Aboriginal co-operatives across the state. An edited version of his report appears below.

The report demonstrates an affinity between the co-operative model and aspects of Aboriginal culture.

It appears to be an effective model whereby Aboriginal groups can meet socially-based needs and provide their own services such as health, childcare and housing, areas appropriately supported by government.

The co-operative model is an appropriate base for current and future independent economic activity such as the management of Aboriginal land and other assets.

There are 26 registered Aboriginal co-operatives in Victoria with a total membership in excess of 3,000. Given that the total Aboriginal population of Victoria according to the 1981 Census was only 6,057 — a figure regarded by the Aboriginal community as a considerable underestimate — it does, nevertheless, indicate an exceptionally high level of participation among Victorian Aborigines.

Nearly half (12) of these co-operatives are involved in the general welfare and advancement of their communities; others have more specific concerns in the areas of housing (2), child care (2), health (2) and alcohol rehabilitation (2), art and craft (2), legal services (1), sport and recreation (1); the majority (14) are situated in rural centres. All are currently registered as community advancement co-operatives.

Membership of Aboriginal co-operatives is usually restricted to Aboriginal people resident in a defined area. The definition of Aboriginal is universally accepted to be:

1. Someone of Aboriginal descent who
2. Identifies as an Aboriginal and is
3. Accepted as such in the Aboriginal community.

The dominance of the co-operative mode of organisation in the Victorian Aboriginal community can be explained in the following ways:

The re-assertion of identity among Aboriginal people has required the organisation of people to seek social solidarity;

Concerns about issues of equity and participation are particularly strong among a people who have been deprived of basic rights and who now wish to gain a much greater degree of self-determination in the conduct of their lives;

The possibility of common ownership of resources in co-operatives is more congruent with traditional Aboriginal society than other forms of organisation;

Aboriginal people are insistent that control of their affairs emanates from inside not from outside their community;

The co-operatives are major providers of public services to their members. This has come about as a result of pressures on established bureaucracies to relinquish some roles in favour of the community controlled and based groups;

Aboriginal people tend not to be as concerned about issues of status and hierarchy as the general community and tend to prefer the more democratic forms of management one expects to find in co-operatives.

Thus the choice for co-operatives can be seen as relating to the particular historical circumstances of Aboriginal people, the need for mutual support, the desire to achieve equal rights; the demand for

greater control over decision making; the continuation of culturally appropriate modes of organisation; the provision of a mechanism for the movement that services collective rather than individual ownership; and which are delivered by Aboriginal people who are responsible to their own community and the preference for less authoritarian work settings.

There may also be less positive, more neutral reasons for establishing co-operatives; such as needing a form (any form) of incorporation to formalise community affairs, to ensure limited liability and enable the receipt of government monies. That co-operative registration can be seen as a mere vehicle to the achievement of these ends is indicated by a recent trend towards the use of the Associations Incorporation Act because its obligations and processes are perceived as simpler and less cumbersome than those required by other forms of incorporation.

Now, and in the foreseeable future, Aboriginal co-operatives are almost entirely dependent on government funding, with the only exception being those which have the potential for economic independence through owning land. Currently the lands transferred to Aboriginal people in Victoria have been vested in Trusts, but recently co-operative rules have been used to provide a secure title for an Aboriginal group and this may set a trend. Without a breakthrough in the economic base, and the most probable source is through a combination of land rights and compensation for dispossession in the form of a substantial cash settlement. Aboriginal organisations can probably only expect to administer their own poverty.

Development needs

There is no doubt that the community services area of Aboriginal co-operatives will continue to grow. The area, however, which has been neglected in the past but which promises to become increasingly important is enterprise development.

The emergence of successful Aboriginal community controlled enterprises would appear to depend on a combination of the following factors:

Adequate capitalisation and continuing financial support for several years.

Skills development in the Aboriginal community, most appropriately acquired through experienced business people working alongside Aboriginal co-operators for a protracted period, as well as courses in local and non-intimidatory settings.

Selection of enterprises that utilise skills, cultural factors and particular advantages of Aboriginal communities, especially those based on secure, communal land ownership.

Willingness of Aboriginal people to participate and sustain the projects.

It would not appear desirable that any single agency be created with sole responsibility for funding and administrative support of Aboriginal co-operatives in Victoria. The advantages of overlapping responsibilities is in flexibility of style and response, something which outweighs the disadvantages of confusion and lack of co-ordination in the present multiplicity of agencies.

One gap is the lack of any organisation which specifically orients promotional and learning materials about co-operatives to Aboriginal communities. This could be the role of a Co-operative Development Agency in consultation with existing co-operatives.

Aboriginal co-operatives may wish to form their own association, but given the proliferation of existing Aboriginal statewide consultative groups, this may prove an imposition. Consequently legislation should not specify or preclude this option.

The simplification of the Co-operation Act could make this option more attractive to Aboriginal groups as a form of incorporation, especially as it potentially allows a greater range of activities, including enterprises, than the Association Incorporation Act. It is reasonable to assume that Aboriginal people will continue to use the co-operative form of organisation. It is familiar and it tends to reinforce the sense of communal identity and pride in people's Aboriginality. It acts like an extended family with a complex net of mutual responsibilities and obligations. Co-operatives also provide a congenial social focus with settings where people feel relaxed and accepted.